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WORLD

Timothy E. Gregory  
**A History of  
Byzantium**

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10

## *The Beginnings of the Macedonian Dynasty*

250	500
750	1000
	1250
	1500
867	Basil I founds Macedonian dynasty
893	Symeon tsar of Bulgaria
920	Romanos Lekapenos emperor
922	First efforts to protect peasant landholdings
961	Nikephoros Phokas conquers Crete

### **The Reign of Basil I (867–886)**

In the midst of the missionary activity in the Balkans and the Photian Schism, Michael III fell from power and a new dynasty was established on the Byzantine throne. Basil I, “the Macedonian,” was born in Thrace or Macedonia, probably of an Armenian family settled in the area earlier in the century. Basil came to seek his fortune in Constantinople; his physical strength gained him a position at court and his victory over several Bulgarian wrestlers supposedly brought him to the attention of Michael III. He soon married Eudokia Ingerina, the emperor’s former mistress, and was able to supplant the caesar Bardas, whom he slew with his own hand in 865. Basil became co-emperor with Michael in 866 and the next year he had the emperor murdered in his sleep. From 867 onward Basil was sole ruler of the Byzantine world and he established a dynasty (the so-called “Macedonian”) that would last for nearly 200 years. The circumstances of Basil’s rise were, of course, something of an embarrassment to the later members of the dynasty, and the historians of this period (notable among them Basil’s grandson, Constantine VII) tried to show that Basil was obliged to overthrow the “corrupt” Amorian dynasty, even though this was clearly an illegal act.

Constantine VII was, in fact, so concerned to protect the historical reputation of his grandfather that he personally wrote (or had written by a close associate) his biography, the *Vita Basilii*, which became the standard view of the first emperor of the Macedonian dynasty.

Constantine's biography pictured Basil as a busy administrator and protector of the poor, who was also (despite his rough origins) a significant patron of the arts. Among the emperor's achievements was the construction of the Nea Ekklesia ("New Church") in the imperial palace in 880. Although this building does not survive, the literary description shows that it was especially sumptuous, with five domes, two exterior fountains, and interior furnishings covered with silver. In the words of his biographer, "This church [was] like a bride adorned with pearls and gold, with gleaming silver, with the variety of many-hued marble" (translated in C. Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 193).

Basil's first concern was naturally to consolidate his power and secure recognition of his legitimacy. He already had two sons, the elder, Constantine, the child of an earlier marriage, and the second, Leo, the son of Eudokia Ingerina;

## Box 10.1 Byzantine Gold

The Byzantine gold coin, the *solidus* or *nomisma*, has often been described as the "dollar of the Middle Ages." It kept its value for approximately 700 years and was used as a standard medium of exchange within the Byzantine Empire and far beyond its borders. The Arab caliphate normally did not strike gold coins of its own, relying instead on Byzantine coins, which they called the *bezant*. The *solidus* also circulated widely throughout Europe and was prized by the chiefs and kings of northern Europe as a mark of their wealth and power. Large hoards of Byzantine gold coins have been found widely in Scandinavia.

The *solidus*, of course, was not just a medium of exchange: it was also a primary opportunity for the emperor and his court to communicate with their subjects, and with important figures beyond the frontiers of the empire. From the beginning the Byzantines followed the Roman practice of placing the figure (usually the head) of the emperor (or emperors) on the obverse (the front) of the coin, occasionally along with symbols or legends that conveyed the ruler's power and achievements. From the middle of the ninth century (after the end of Iconoclasm) the emperor was replaced on the obverse with the figure of Christ, who was thus seen as the real ruler of the empire, and he was described in the legend on the coin as "Jesus Christ, King of those who rule." The figure of the emperor, the imperial family, or occasionally a representation of the emperor being crowned by Christ, the Virgin, or a saint, was then placed on the reverse (the back) of the coin – an indication that the emperor, although less important than God, was still God's representative on earth and unquestioned ruler of the *oikoumene* (the created world).

The most remarkable aspect of the gold coinage was its stability. The *solidus* was originally struck under Constantine I at a weight of 72 coins to a pound of gold (i.e., each coin was 1/72nd of a pound in weight or approximately 4.4 grams), which could also be expressed as a weight of 24

*keratia* or carats.

Through the subsequent 700 years there was no significant variation in the value of the *nomisma* (as it came more commonly to be called). In the sixth and seventh centuries some lightweight *solidi* were struck, at a weight of 22 *keratia*, but for the most part the standard 24-carat *nomisma* remained the basic gold coin.

In the middle of the tenth century, however, the emperor Nikephoros Phokas (963–9) struck a new coin that was 1/12th lighter than the standard coin, with a weight of 22 *keratia*. This coin was clearly designed to raise money for the state since it allowed it to make more coins with the same amount of gold and to pay salaries and other state obligations with the new, less valuable coin. This naturally had the effect of devaluing the currency. The lightweight *terarteron*, as the coin was called, apparently circulated alongside the standard full-weight coin (which came to be called the *histamenon*). In the eleventh century, however, a process of systematic devaluation began, which can be documented in the decrease in the fineness of the gold used in the coins. For the most part, each ruler allowed the fineness of the gold to fluctuate, perhaps depending on economic and political conditions. Thus, we may note the following values:

Michael IV (1034 – 41)	24–19.5 <i>keratia</i>
Constantine IX Monomachos (1042–55)	24 –18 <i>keratia</i>
Romanos IV Diogenes (1067–71)	18–16 <i>keratia</i>
Michael VII Doukas (1071–8)	16 –12 <i>keratia</i>
Nikephoros III Votaneiates (1078 – 81)	ca. 8 <i>keratia</i>

From these figures we can see that in a period of less than 50 years the Byzantine gold coins lost roughly two-thirds of their value. There must have been significant effects of this on the economy, and we can be certain that there was considerable inflation, but modern economic developments show that some inflation is not necessarily harmful for the economy and we cannot actually be certain what the long-term effect of this change was on the economy of the Byzantine Empire. Certainly some people, perhaps especially traders, must have been hurt by this, and, naturally, from this time onward the Byzantine *nomisma* lost much of its prestige and universal acceptability. It remained, however, one of the basic currencies of the Mediterranean area and was used by merchants of all ethnicities right to the end of the empire.

Probably more seriously, the devaluation of the *nomisma* was a mark that the state itself was experiencing a chronic shortage of income, and this may reasonably be associated with the growth of the power of the large landholders, who were able to escape their duties to pay taxes to the central administration.

For more information on Byzantine coinage and the Byzantine economy, see M. F. Hendy, *Studies in the Byzantine Monetary Economy, c.300–1450* (Cambridge, 1985), especially pp. 506–10.

rumors circulated for years concerning the latter, that he was not, in fact, the son of Basil but rather of Michael III, and this certainly complicated issues later on. Basil moved quickly to secure the legitimacy of his own dynasty, having Constantine crowned emperor in 869 and Leo in 870. At first there was significant opposition to Basil from the army, which had experienced real success under the old regime. Basil sought supporters wherever he could find them in order to neutralize the opposition, and he found some among those who remained opposed to the patriarchate of Photios. Accordingly, as early as 867,

Basil had Photios deposed and Ignatios restored as patriarch. This was mainly a political move and Photios was soon employed as tutor to Basil's children. Basil, however, did have interests in the West that were different from those of his predecessors, and for this he needed some accommodation with the papacy. A council was held in Constantinople in 869–70 that included legates from Pope Hadrian II, and Photios was once again excommunicated. The council also met with an embassy from Bulgaria asking for clarification of the status of the Bulgarian church. The issue arose when Boris-Michael found that the Byzantines planned to keep the Bulgarian church closely under the control of the patriarch of Constantinople, and he sought to find a better arrangement through an alliance with Rome. The papacy, however, was no more accommodating than the Byzantines and the Bulgarians requested a council to discuss the administration of the Bulgarian church. In this issue the patriarchate of Ignatios maintained the policies set by Photios and defended Byzantine interests in the Balkans. Despite the protests of the papal legates, the question was decided in favor of Byzantium, and the Bulgarian church remained in the sphere of Constantinople. However, even though bishops for the new church were still consecrated in Constantinople, Boris-Michael had made a point and used the antagonism between Rome and Byzantium to show

## Box 10.2 Decoration of the Kainourgion Palace

Among the lavish structures constructed by the emperor Basil I was a residence within the Great Palace called the Kainourgion ("New Palace"). The emperor's biography, the *Vita Basili*, written probably by his grandson Constantine VII, describes the decoration of the residence in some detail, including its elaborate dynastic propaganda. The building was supported by 16 columns, eight of which were of green stone from Thessaly and the others of onychite, whose surfaces were all decorated with relief carving.

What seems to have been a throne room apparently had a half-dome on the eastern end (just like a church) and the interior of the ceiling was completely covered with glass mosaic tesserae with pure gold filling. Apparently, in the half-dome was a representation of Basil himself, seated and accompanied by the figures of his victorious generals, each of whom presented to him images of the cities they had captured and brought within the Byzantine Empire. Above the half-dome the emperor's Herculean labors were depicted, his deeds in war by which he benefited the citizens of the empire.

Apparently there was a bedchamber attached to the throne room. The floor of this was paved with stones forming concentric circles, with rivers and eagles in the four corners and the mosaic image of a peacock in the center. The lower courses of the walls were decorated with multicolored stones, while above were bands of flowers made in gold mosaic. In the highest register was a mosaic representation of the emperor, again enthroned, together with his wife Eudokia. "The children they had in common are represented round the building like shining stars, they, too, adorned with imperial vestments and crowns. The male ones among them are shown holding codices that contain

the divine commandments (which they were taught to follow), while the female progeniture had been initiated into holy writ and shared in divine wisdom, even if their father had not at first been familiar with letters on account of the circumstances of his life, and yet caused all his children to partake of learning.”

On the ceiling of the bedchamber were more mosaics, with a cross at the center. “All round the latter, like stars shining in the sky, you may see the illustrious Emperor himself, his wife and all their children raising their arms to God and the life-giving sign of the Cross and all but crying out that ‘on account of this victorious Symbol everything that is good and agreeable to God has been accomplished and achieved in our reign.’ There is furthermore an inscription of thanksgiving addressed to God by the parents on behalf of the children, and of the children on behalf of their parents. The one addressed by the parents is conceived in more or less the following words: ‘We thank Thee, O God most kind and King of them that reign, that Thou hast surrounded us with children who are grateful for the magnitude of Thy commandments, and so that, in this also, we may give thanks for Thy goodness.’ The children’s [prayer] is expressed as follows: ‘We thank Thee, O Word of God, that Thou hast raised our father from Davidic poverty and has anointed him with the unction of Thy Holy Ghost. Guard him and our mother by Thy hand, while deeming both them and ourselves worthy of Thy heavenly Kingdom.’”

The propaganda here is especially interesting, as is the author’s observation that Basil wanted to depict his children’s education, even though he himself had been deprived of such an opportunity, and his notice that care was taken to introduce both the males and the females of the family to “holy wisdom.”

(Translation from Cyril Mango, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1972; repr. Toronto, 1986), pp. 196–8)

that consideration would have to be shown to the interests of the Bulgarian church and to the country as a whole.

In military terms Basil attempted to equal the accomplishments of Michael III, but in this he fell considerably short. He did have some success in Italy, where the Byzantines had little military presence since the days of Leo III over a century earlier, and where the situation had changed dramatically with the advance of the Arabs and the creation of the Frankish empire in the West. Basil was able to secure the allegiance of the Lombard prince of Benevento and the city of Bari, so that a Byzantine foothold in southern Italy was still assured, and late in Basil’s reign the able command of Nikephoros Phokas brought considerable success. Unfortunately, however, in Sicily the great city of Syracuse, which had long withstood the Arabs, finally fell to them in 878. Basil’s policy of accommodation with the West seems to have been based on the hope of a military alliance with the western emperor Louis II against the Arabs in southern Italy and Sicily, but this eventually came to nothing.

**Map 10.1** Byzantium in the ninth century (after Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization*, 5th edn (Belmont, CA, 2003), p. 183)



In Asia Minor the Paulicians continued to represent a considerable military threat under their leader Chrysocheir (Golden Hand). Basil's brother-in-law Christopher defeated the Paulicians in 872, destroying their capital of Tephrike, and Chrysocheir was murdered by a renegade follower. The movement henceforth ceased to be a military threat. Basil was able to move forward along the Euphrates, consolidating the Byzantine frontier in the East. The continued weakness of the caliphate allowed the development of an independent power in Armenia, which was recognized by both the Byzantines and the Arabs. Basil was also able to occupy Cyprus and to hold it for several years.

In religious policy, Basil realized that the policies of Photios represented the best interests of Byzantium, especially since his attempt at accommodation with the West had largely failed. Thus, when Ignatios died in 877, Photios again became patriarch. The pope agreed to his elevation, and a council in 879 formally settled the dispute and ended the Photian Schism with the total victory of Photios. Thus, the ambitions of the papacy were at least temporarily forestalled and the Byzantine church remained independent and was able to continue its protective role over the new Slavic Christians in the Balkans.

**Figure 10.1** Church of the Virgin at Skripou (ancient Orchomenos) in Voiotia: view from the west. This important church was constructed, according to inscriptions built into the exterior of the structure, by a certain Leo, who held the imperial rank of *protospatharios*, in 873/4. Leo probably was probably originally from this part of central Greece but he made his fortune in the army or the imperial court in Constantinople. He then presumably returned home and invested his wealth in construction of the church, making considerable use of the many stones from the ancient buildings that were then in ruin in the vicinity.  
Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



**Figure 10.2** A part of one of the inscriptions of Leo the Protospatharios on the apse of the church at Skripou. The inscriptions were written in classical Greek verse which was no doubt meant to demonstrate Leo's familiarity with higher culture and to impress visitors to the church with his learning. In this portion of the text can be seen the names of the emperors Basil II, Constantine IX, and Leo, and their title "emperors of the Romans." Photo: Timothy E. Gregory.



Despite his lowly origins and questionable rise to power, Basil was interested in administration, and he was one of the most prolific lawgivers since the time of Justinian. He sought to carry out a complete reorganization of the law, revising the codes of Justinian and supplementing them with more recent laws. This was never fully accomplished, but between 870 and 879 Basil did publish the *Procheiron*, a handbook for the practical use of lawyers and judges. This was followed by the *Epanagoge*, which had a purpose and content similar to the *Procheiron*, but with much more attention to the political theory behind the legal system. In particular, the *Epanagoge* provided an elegant statement on the relationship between the emperor and patriarch who, together, were responsible

for the administration of the world, the one in charge of the administration of secular affairs, the other harmoniously responsible for mankind's spiritual well-being.

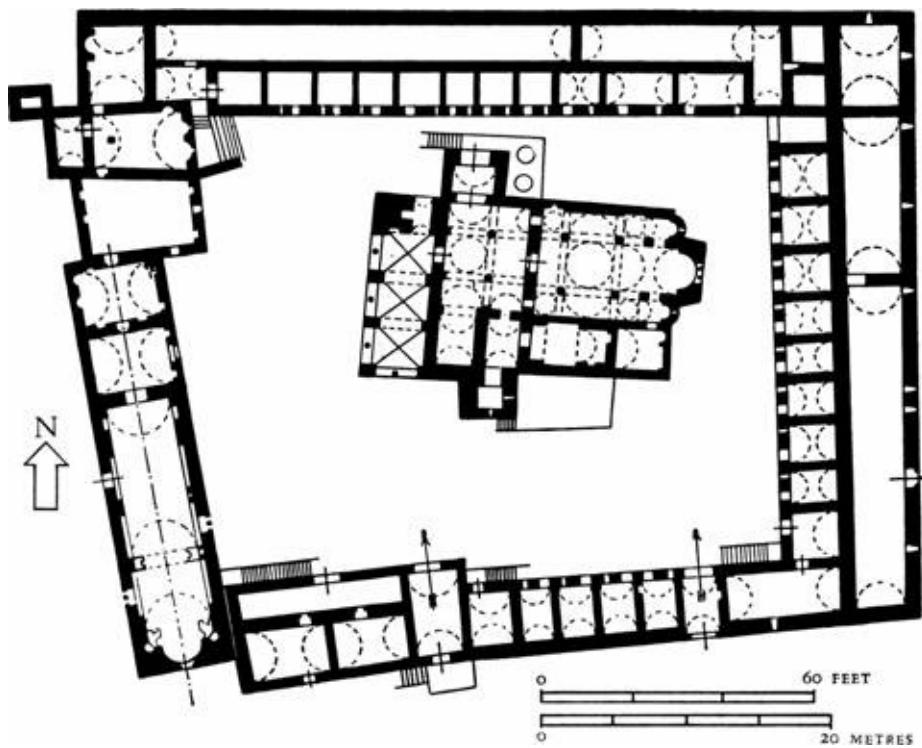
## The Patriarch Photios

The accomplishments of Photios cannot be compressed into a simple political narrative. He was, of course, deeply involved in the political affairs of his time and his voluminous letters (to foreign rulers as well as religious officials) display his keen knowledge, psychological insight, and determination to support the interests of Byzantium in all areas. We have already discussed his role as patriarch of Constantinople and his support of the emperor and the mission to the Slavs. He was one of the foremost shapers of the expansionist policies that were to characterize the Byzantine state and church over the next two centuries.

Yet Photios was just as important as a scholar. He was influential in the revival of interest in ancient literature in Constantinople and his numerous and varied works provide a valuable insight into the intellectual world of the time. Like most Byzantine intellectuals, he was interested in both secular and religious topics and saw no contradiction between them. His best-known work is the *Bibliotheca* (Library), which contains a description of some 386 books that he and his friends read. Supposedly the book was assembled for his brother Tarasios, who was away from Constantinople, as an account of what he had missed at group readings in the capital, and it therefore presumably represents the tastes and interests of the literati at that time. The books described were written by both pagan and Christian authors and they include many works that survived to Photios' time but are now lost; in this respect the *Bibliotheca* provides invaluable information about ancient literature as well as an insight into the intellectual tastes of the ninth century.

Also of considerable importance is his *Lexikon*, a dictionary of words and phrases that he found interesting or problematic. As such, the work also provides information about the intellectual climate of the period and the text itself preserves many phrases from lost ancient books, since he commonly quoted whole passages in his discussion. His *Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* is a detailed discussion of the issue of the *filioque* and argues strongly about the importance of the issue and the fallacies of the western position. He also wrote many sermons, letters, and other works that provide significant details about life in the period and illuminate aspects of Byzantine foreign policy.

**Figure 10.3** Plan of the monastery of Osios Meletios on Mount Kithairon in central Greece. Byzantine monasteries normally took the shape shown here: a rough rectangle that served as a defensive wall within which were the rooms that served as the cells of the monks. A formal reception room and the quarters of the abbot would also normally be located in the exterior circuit. The interior of the enclosure would be dominated by the church or, often, by two churches: one reserved for the monks and the other open to visitors as well. The monastery would also include a kitchen and bakery, along with a dining room (*trapeza*). The latter was commonly a separate building that was usually elaborately decorated, although at Osios Meletios these facilities were built into the exterior series of room.



Photios had direct contact with the Arabs, and some scholars think he made use of the libraries in Baghdad during a diplomatic visit there. He is an especially good example of the Byzantine scholar-politician who found himself equally at home in the palace and the church. The vicissitudes of his life also provide insight into the complex interplay of forces at the time, both within and outside of Byzantium. At one time he was condemned by western scholars as the cause of the split between the eastern and the western churches, but this view has now been generally abandoned. Photios is recognized as a saint by the Orthodox church.

## The Reign of Leo VI (886–912)

Basil's favorite and first-born son Constantine died in 879, and the emperor was forced, apparently reluctantly, to arrange for the succession of his second son, Leo VI (886–912); there were rumors, it should be remembered, that Leo was not the natural son of Basil but of Michael III. Nonetheless, after Basil's death (in a hunting accident) Leo assumed the throne without difficulty, and he began at once to reverse some of his father's acts. Thus, he arranged immediately for the reburial of Michael III with full imperial honors, giving rise to further gossip about Leo's parentage. He also quickly arranged for the deposition of Photios and his replacement by the emperor's younger brother Stephen, who was only 16 years old. Leo took as his foremost adviser the Armenian Stylianos Zautzes, who was also the father of Leo's mistress (and later wife) Zoe; Zautzes was given the new title *basileopator*.

**Map 10.2** East central Europe in the early Middle Ages (after D. Obolensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth: Eastern Europe, 500–1453* (New York, 1971), map 5, p. 135)



Despite these reactions against his father, Leo's foreign policy followed the same direction as that of the last Amorians and Basil I. Symeon was now ruler of Bulgaria, and he provided one of the most serious threats that Byzantium was to face. Symeon was a younger son of Boris-Michael, and he had been sent to Constantinople to be trained for a career in the church. He was recalled to Bulgaria in 893 and became tsar (from the Roman-Byzantine word *caesar/kaisar*). Symeon was dangerous to Byzantium not only because of his natural ability as ruler and military strategist, but even more because he knew and understood the Byzantines and the power of Byzantine ideology.

War broke out over trade issues. The Byzantines always sought to control points where foreign goods entered Byzantium, largely so the state could collect an import duty, but Bulgarian traders had always been allowed to carry out their business in Constantinople. In 893, however, the Byzantine officials in charge of this trade decided to increase the taxes on Bulgarian goods and to move the market to Thessaloniki; as a result, Symeon decided to force the issue by war and he invaded Byzantine territory in 894. Stylianos Zautzes appears to have suggested that the Byzantines meet this challenge by allying with the Magyars, a Turkic people who were settled to the northeast of Bulgaria, between the Danube and the Dnieper Rivers. As Symeon waged war against the Byzantines in the south the Magyars attacked Bulgaria from the north, forcing Symeon to conclude a truce with Byzantium. Symeon, however, had learned his lessons well in Constantinople and he quickly made a treaty with the Patzinaks (Pechenegs), a people of disputed origins (perhaps Turkic) who settled in the Volga basin in the late ninth century. The Magyars thus found themselves caught in a vice between the Bulgars and the Patzinaks, and they fled to the west, where they settled in the Danube basin, in the area of modern Hungary, where their descendants have remained until the present day. The settlement of the Magyars, incidentally, had the effect of driving a wedge through the areas inhabited by the Slavic peoples, separating the southern Slavs (Croats, Serbs, etc.) from the Slavs to the north and east. Freed from the pressure of the Magyars, Symeon turned again to Byzantium, defeating the Byzantine army in 896 before agreeing to a peace treaty in which the Byzantines were obliged to pay substantial tribute to Bulgaria.

Byzantine military activity in the West was naturally affected by Byzantine attention to the conflict with Symeon, and in 902 Taormina, the last Byzantine stronghold in Sicily, was lost to the Arabs. Particularly dangerous was the situation in the Aegean, where the Byzantines were not able to maintain a

vigorous defense against the Arabs. In 904 Leo of Tripoli, a former Christian, led a large fleet from Syria against Constantinople, but he turned aside and attacked Thessaloniki instead. Thessaloniki, the second most important city of the empire, was not prepared for the onslaught, and it quickly fell. The Arabs slaughtered and imprisoned about half the population and then withdrew. Byzantine military success in Syria produced Arab prisoners who were then exchanged for some of those taken in Thessaloniki. The Byzantine imperial navy sought to reduce the danger of invasion by sea, and attacks were made on Cyprus and Crete, but these were ultimately repulsed, and the Aegean remained subject to Arab incursions.

Meanwhile, the Rhos had come to play a larger role in Byzantine affairs. In 907 their ruler Oleg brought a large fleet to Constantinople and used that naval show of power to secure a treaty with the Byzantines (normally dated to 911) which afforded Russian merchants a favorable trading position in Constantinople. This was further indication that the Rhos were eclipsing the Khazars as the dominant power north of the Black Sea, confirmed by their conquest of Kiev, on the Dneiper River, ca. 930, which henceforth became the capital of the Rhos and a major commercial and cultural place of contact between the Russians and Byzantium.

Leo VI is known in Byzantine tradition as Leo the Wise, because of his considerable learning and his works on diverse topics in many styles: political orations, liturgical poems, and theological treatises; he was known frequently to deliver ornate sermons in the churches of Constantinople. He was regarded as wise even during his own reign, but his reputation later grew, and he was seen as a prophet and even a magician, whose oracles (not really his own, but attributed to him) were thought to foretell the future of the world.

Leo followed the precedent of Basil I in terms of his legal activity. He set up a legal commission that carried out his father's intent to codify all of existing Byzantine law. This was accomplished in a work of 60 books that occupied six volumes, variously called the *Exavivlos* or the *Vasilika* (*Basilika*). The *Vasilika* was comprehensive, presenting in the Greek language virtually all the laws in the Justinianic Corpus, arranged here (as it had not been before) in a systematic manner. The *Vasilika* thus provided a basis on which all later Byzantine law could be built, and Leo himself began this new tradition with a series of "Novels" (New Laws) that dealt with contemporary problems and issues. Both the *Vasilika* and the Novels dealt with ecclesiastical law (canon law) as much as with secular law, and they finally did away with most of the now outdated institutions such as the city councils (*curiae, voulai*) and the Roman Senate. The

so-called *Book of the Eparch* and the *Kletorologion of Philotheos* were also issued under Leo's name and testify to his government's interest in organization and the maintenance of public order. The *Book of the Eparch* provided rules and regulations for trade and trade organizations in Constantinople, while the *Kletorologion of Philotheos* regulated the officials and their ranks and titles at the court in Constantinople.

**Figure 10.4** Gold coin of Leo VI. The obverse of this coin has a bust of the Virgin praying, with the legend "Maria" and the abbreviations "MR" and "ThY," which stand for "Mother of God." On the reverse is a strikingly realistic image of the emperor with the legend "Leo in Christ Emperor of the Romans." Courtesy of the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Bequest of Thomas Whittemore. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College; DOC III/2, 1b.2.



One of the signal events of Leo's reign was his difficulty in securing an heir to the throne. He had been married early to the pious Theophano (regarded as a saint by the Orthodox church), but she died in 897. Next Leo married his mistress Zoe, the daughter of Stylianos Zautzes, in 898, but she died in 899. The Orthodox church generally allowed remarriage (after death or divorce), but only one time – that is, a person could be legally married only twice. Thus, when Leo was married for a third time, to Eudokia Vaiana (Baiana) in 900, he directly violated the law of both church and state, which he had himself recently reissued in an especially strong format. Leo was, however, in a difficult situation, since the continuation of the dynasty depended on a male heir to the throne, and he was willing to accept the disapproval of members of the hierarchy for his action. Unfortunately, however, Eudokia Vaiana also soon died – in 901 – and Leo still did not have an heir. The emperor avoided further infuriating the church by yet another marriage, but he took as his mistress Zoe Karvounopsina (Zoe "with coal-black eyes"), who was a member of an important family in Constantinople.

In 905 Zoe gave birth to a son, the future emperor Constantine VII (912– 59),

and it was crucial for Leo to legitimize the child in order to preserve his claim to the throne. The patriarch of Constantinople at this time was Nikolaos Mystikos, who had been appointed in 901. Nikolaos was born in southern Italy but came to Constantinople and was an associate of Photios. Leo brought him into the imperial court with the title of *mystikos* (probably as an imperial secretary). After the birth of his son in 905 Leo realized that there would be opposition to the legitimization of the boy on the part of his church so he made an arrangement with Nikolaos Mystikos that he would separate from Zoe, on condition that the baby be baptized. The baptism took place early in 906, but almost immediately afterwards Leo and Zoe were married and Zoe was proclaimed as *augusta*. The patriarch was infuriated, and much of the church hierarchy with him, and the emperor was forbidden to enter the church. Leo, however, took a page from the book of those who opposed emperors in earlier times and appealed to the papacy; Pope Sergius III was quite happy to offer a dispensation from canon law, since the emperor's request acknowledged the superiority of the pope to the patriarch of Constantinople. In the aftermath Nicholas Mystikos was deposed as patriarch, and the young Constantine VII was crowned as co-emperor in 908. The issue of the Tetragamy (four marriages) of Leo VI naturally opened all the old controversies concerning the subjection (or not) of the emperor to Christian morality, with some interesting new twists. Many people (led by the former patriarch) were naturally scandalized by the immorality of the emperor, while others were willing to accept it in light of the need to preserve the dynasty. As long as Leo lived, of course, he was able to enforce his will.

## The Regency and Romanos Lekapenos

Leo VI died in 912 and, because of Constantine's youth, he was succeeded by his brother Alexander (912–13), who had been named co-emperor some time earlier. Alexander immediately set about reversing his brother's policies, starting with the exile of Zoe from the palace and the recall of Nicholas Mystikos as patriarch. Alexander also refused to pay to Bulgaria the tribute that had been agreed upon by the treaty of 896, and Symeon immediately took the field against Byzantium. In this situation, Alexander promptly died (913).

Constantine VII was the only remaining male member of the Macedonian dynasty and affairs were controlled by a council of regency, initially led by the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, who of course regarded Constantine as illegitimate.

The situation was complex and loyalties were divided, and in the midst of this a revolt broke out, led by Constantine Doukas, commander of the *Scholai* and member of an important military family that had risen to prominence under Leo VI. The revolt nearly succeeded, but Doukas was killed just as he sought to seize the palace. Symeon had meanwhile driven through Byzantine territory and stood before the walls of Constantinople (in the summer of 913). Unlike other foreign rulers, who wasted their efforts in futile attacks against the walls of the city, Symeon understood the political situation in the capital and he sought to take advantage of it to control all of Byzantium. The Bulgarian tsar was granted an interview with members of the regency, who agreed to all of Symeon's demands: one of his daughters was to be married to Constantine VII, and the patriarch crowned Symeon as emperor (certainly understood by the Byzantines as emperor of Bulgaria and not of the whole empire). Symenon, however, was satisfied with a situation that promised to give him control of the empire.

Shortly after Symeon's departure from Constantinople, however, there was a coup. Zoe returned to the palace as head of the regency, and her government called off the marriage alliance and denied the imperial title to Symeon. Rudely rebuffed, the Bulgarian emperor naturally invaded Byzantine territory again, but Zoe refused all concessions. The commanders of the army, however, including Leo and Bardas Phokas, conspired against Zoe, and power was eventually seized by Romanos Lekapenos, son of an Armenian peasant and commander of the Byzantine navy. When the empress' army was unable to accomplish anything against Symeon, Romanos gained control of Constantinople, removed Zoe to a monastery, and in 919 arranged for the marriage of Constantine VII to his daughter Helena. In 920 Romanos was crowned co-emperor and from this point on he was, in fact, master of the empire.

Symeon's army remained unchecked in the Balkans, and the Bulgarian tsar was furious with the way his plans had been thwarted. Romanos I Lekapenos (920–44) dealt cleverly with Symeon, refusing to meet him openly in the field, but remaining safe behind the walls of Constantinople and speaking to the Bulgarian as his moral superior, grudgingly granting him the title of emperor of the Bulgarians, but adamantly refusing any consideration of his demands for power within Byzantium. Lekapenos also used diplomacy to distract and defeat his rival. When Symeon sought naval support from the Arabs, the emperor was able to outbid him, and Byzantium and Bulgaria then fought a long struggle for control of Serbia, eventually won by Symeon in 924. His involvement with Croatia, however, under its first king Tomislav, resulted in a disastrous defeat

(ca. 926).

After this Symeon appears to have planned further attacks on Byzantium, but he died suddenly in 927, and his son Peter sought accommodation with the empire, at least for the moment. A marriage was arranged between Peter and Maria Lekapena, granddaughter of Romanos Lekapenos, and the empire recognized the legitimacy of the Bulgarian patriarchate that had apparently been recently established. These concessions to Bulgaria were reasonable, and they recognized the considerable military power Bulgaria possessed; they also led to a prolonged period of peace and Byzantine influence in the whole of the southern Balkans. Serbia, for example, gained independence from Bulgaria, and Prince Časlav allied himself with Byzantium.

During the reign of Peter of Bulgaria a new religious group appeared in the Balkans. These were the Bogomils, who derived their doctrines from a priest called Bogomil who apparently lived in Bulgaria during the first half of the tenth century. They were dualists and believed that the material world, including the Incarnation of Christ, was the work of the Devil; a select group of Bogomil initiates avoided sexual intercourse, meat, and wine. They may have been influenced by Paulicians from Asia Minor who were settled in the Balkans, but this connection is far from clear. Unlike the Paulicians, the Bogomils did not engage in military action against the state, although they resisted all attempts to convert them to orthodox forms of Christianity, and they survived in the Balkans at least until the Ottoman conquest.

Romanos Lekapenos had, meanwhile, solidified his position in Constantinople. He hesitated to remove the legitimate Macedonian emperor Constantine VII, but he had himself proclaimed the senior emperor and his three sons were crowned along with him. He appointed John Kourkouas, a talented general, as *domestikos* of the *Scholai* and he married his younger daughters to aristocratic families such as the Argyroi and Musele; the patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, no friend of the Macedonian dynasty, was a natural ally, especially since a church council in 920 had definitively decided in the patriarch's favor in the issue of the Tetragamy. The controversies and struggles that had rocked the Byzantine church for years were at last settled. Ultimately, after the death of Nicholas Mystikos, Romanos had his 16-year-old son consecrated as patriarch and the emperor was able effectively to control church policy for most of his reign.

Romanos was especially concerned about the growing tendency of the aristocracy (often called simply the *dynatoi*, “the powerful”) to gobble up the landholdings of the poor. With the relative stability of the military situation in

the empire since the ninth century, the provincial aristocratic families had grown in power and wealth; with their greater opportunity to survive invasions and famines, they frequently found themselves in a position to purchase or to claim by default the land of the poor. The precise course of this development is naturally difficult to trace, and it must have varied from place to place. Furthermore, the exact nature of the relationship between the *dynatoi* and the *ptochoi* (poor) is uncertain, but some of the poor, at least, became *paroikoi*, or dependent tenant farmers. Earlier institutions, such as the *allelengyon*, were designed to protect peasant landholdings, but as peasant landholdings continued to decline Romanos Lekapenos attempted to reverse the trend toward the sale of such land to the wealthy. His legislation, beginning in 922, targeted the issue of the alienation (by sale or some other means) of peasant land, especially when it had become vacant, and he devised a system of *protimesis* (priority) which laid out clearly the order in which peasant land could be purchased. Thus, relatives, joint-holders, and neighbors were given priority, in carefully designated order; only when no one in these categories was able to purchase the land could it be sold to outsiders. Romanos even realized that there would certainly be violation of these principles and he declared that property acquired illegally would have to be returned, without compensation, subject only to a limitation of ten years (30 in the case of soldiers' land), meaning that land illegally acquired could be demanded back any time before the end of this period. Indeed, it is clear that the legislation was not fully successful, since it had to be reissued, and the underlying problem of poverty and famine, which led to the sale of peasant lands in the first place, was not addressed.

After the amelioration of the Bulgarian threat in 927, Byzantium was able to turn its military attention again to the East, where the Abbasid caliphate continued its decline. Romanos' general John Kourkouas had notable success, leading in 934 to the surrender of Meletine. Kourkouas, however, met a significant adversary in the person of Saif-ad-Daulah, the emir of Aleppo and Mosul and a member of the Hamdanid family. The empire formed an alliance with the caliphate and the semi-independent dynasty of the Ikhshidids in Egypt against Saif-ad-Daulah. The Hamdanid, however, made a successful attack on the empire and invaded Armenia before he turned his attention south to intervene in the affairs of the caliphate.

In 941 Igor, the son of Oleg and first prince of Kiev, led the Rhos in a surprise attack on Constantinople. Kourkouas returned from the eastern front

## Box 10.3 The Mandylion

The Mandylion (literally, the “scarf”) was one of a class of holy objects called *acheiropoieta* (things not made by hands). According to a story that is first attested in the sixth century, Abgar, the king of Edessa (in Syria), became ill and, learning of the fame of Christ, asked him to come and cure him. Christ, however, pressed his face to a scarf and his image was miraculously impressed on the cloth. The image was brought to the king, who was immediately cured.

The Mandylion remained in Edessa, even after the Arab conquest. In 944, under Romanos Lekapenos, the Byzantine general John Kourouas besieged Edessa and he received the holy image as a condition for his lifting of the siege. The Mandylion was transported in triumph through Asia Minor to Constantinople, where it was installed in the palace.

The image was often copied and it was a frequent part of the decoration of a church. Theologically the Mandylion was important because its presence was seen as a proof of the physical reality of Christ’s Incarnation (he was a real man – fully human – whose features could be directly reproduced through this miraculous means). It was therefore a proof used by those who wanted to defend the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon, and its existence was also an argument for the defense of the veneration of ikons.

**Figure 10.5** The Mandylion. This fresco is from the church of the Panagia tou Arakou, Lagoudera in Cyprus. The inscription reads IC XC, which is the standard abbreviation for “Jesus Christ,” and, below, “The Holy Mandylion.” Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC (DOC 3/1, 2a.1).



The depiction of the face of Christ on the Mandylion is certainly that of the Pantokrator (All-Ruler) that came to be the standard Byzantine type and had important influence on the medieval West and even into modern times. The Byzantine Mandylion is probably the source of the western tradition of Veronica’s Veil and perhaps even the Shroud of Turin. It may well also be associated with what became the standard representation of Christ on Byzantine coins in the tenth to eleventh centuries.

and defeated them in a significant land battle, while the Russian fleet was destroyed by Greek Fire. A treaty signed in 944 between Constantinople and Igor reproduced many of the terms of the treaty of 911, but the balance of power had clearly shifted toward Byzantium.

With the Russian threat temporarily removed, Kourkouas could return to the East, where he won striking victories on the middle Euphrates, taking the towns of Amida, Dara, and Nisibis – places that had last been contested by the Byzantines in the fourth century. Finally, in 944 he besieged Edessa, which resulted in the surrender of the Mandylion to the Byzantines, one of the greatest relics in Christianity.

Romanos, however, was unable to enjoy the full results of these triumphs. In 931 the emperor's oldest and most talented son, Christopher, had died. Romanos realized that his younger sons were not really qualified to rule, and he seems to have decided with reluctance that actual power would eventually return to the legitimate emperor, Constantine VII. Determining to pre-empt this, Romanos' younger sons engineered a coup in late 944 in which they deposed their father, exiled him to a monastery, and seized power themselves. In doing so, however, they miscalculated seriously, on both the degree of sentiment in favor of the legitimate dynasty and the cleverness of Constantine himself. A counter-revolt broke out early in 945; the sons of Romanos joined their father in exile, and the legitimate emperor assumed power in his own name.

### Box 10.4 Liudprand of Cremona in Constantinople

Liudprand of Cremona (ca. 920–ca. 972) was an Italian diplomat and administrator who served first Berengar II, king of Italy, and then Otto I of Germany (who had annexed Italy to the German Empire). Liudprand was named bishop of Cremona and played a leading role at the emperor's court. He was familiar with Constantinople because his father and stepfather had undertaken embassies there in the earlier tenth century and he knew the Greek language.

Liudprand made at least two official journeys to Byzantium, one in 949–50 as the representative of Berengar, and the second in 968 as the emissary of Otto I. He wrote reports of each that portray his own lively and sometimes belligerent personality and provide valuable detail about Constantinople and life at the Byzantine court, especially as it was viewed by a foreigner. It is significant that the two journeys turned out very differently, the first a great success and the second a dismal failure, and this is certainly reflected in the tone of the two different works.

Liudprand's *Antapodosis* (*Tit-for-Tat*) is a general history of Byzantium, Germany, and Italy in his own time and it contains a detailed report of his visit to the court of Constantine VII in 949–50. He was well treated by the scholarly emperor and the two men apparently got on well. He seems to have been genuinely impressed with the splendor of imperial ceremony; this can be seen in his

detailed description of how the emperor passed out gifts to his officials and entertained guests (including himself) at a lavish formal dinner. His work also contains information about earlier Byzantine history and relations with Italy and the Rhos, details that may have come directly from the scholarly archives of Constantine VII.

Liudprand's *Narrative of an Embassy to Constantinople* was a report to Otto I about his second embassy to the court of Nikephoros II Phokas in 968. The purpose of this visit was to arrange a marriage between Otto II, the son of Otto I, and a Byzantine princess. At this time, of course, the issue of diplomatic marriages must have been a particularly sensitive one in Constantinople as Nikephoros himself was emperor only because he was married to the widow of Romanos II and guardian of the legitimate emperor Basil II. Nikephoros was, in addition, a rough and relatively coarse soldier, confident in his own military strength and his ascetic proclivities. On all these counts, therefore, he was not apt to welcome the invitation from the polite and cultivated Italian bishop. The result is that Liudprand's account of his second visit is as full of detail as that of his first embassy, but the tone is completely different. In the latter case Liudprand describes Constantinople and the imperial court in condescending and hostile terms, commenting on the poverty of the garments and trappings of the court and the mean-spirited way in which he was treated. His description of Nikephoros II is a classic example of propaganda and calumny, so overdone that it becomes humorous. Thus, the report is enormously valuable for the wealth of detail it provides, but its broader purpose, either to cultivate hostility toward Byzantium at the German court or to cover up the failure of the embassy, makes it an important document in the development of hostile attitudes toward Byzantium in the West.

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## The Reign of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitos

After 32 years of waiting on the sidelines and at the age of 39 Constantine VII (945–59) finally assumed power in his own name. Modern scholars often characterize Constantine as bookish and withdrawn, more interested in art and literature than in politics. He was clearly concerned with culture and he was apparently a painter in his own right. He collected books and official notices, and he was an important figure in the systematization of knowledge that characterized the period. He surrounded himself with a circle of scholars who wrote histories and encyclopedic works on many topics, including even agricultural science. As previously mentioned, he was probably the author of a biography of his grandfather and responsible for significant other historical compilations of the day. Nonetheless, Constantine was also politically aware and he was probably at least partly responsible for the overthrow of the Lekapenoi.

He was an astute political propagandist, and was determined to use this skill in his own behalf and in the perpetuation of the dynasty.

**Figure 10.6** Ivory of Constantine VII. Small-sized sculptures in ivory were popular from Roman times through the whole of the Byzantine period, especially for images of considerable significance such as those of emperors and religious figures. The emperor shown here in his full ceremonial dress is identified as Constantine VII on the basis of his resemblance to known portraits on items such as coins. He is pictured here, however, as his namesake Constantine I, the first Christian emperor. Photo © Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Image Collections & Fieldwork Archives, Washington DC.



Almost immediately Constantine had his son Romanos crowned as emperor, thus securing the survival of the dynasty. Romanos, it should be remembered, was the son of Helen Lekapena and thus grandson of Romanos Lekapenos. During the period in which he actually held power Constantine continued to busy himself with scholarship, especially with the compilation of works that would be useful for the administration of the empire and the success of his son as emperor. He apparently compiled the *De administrando imperio* (on foreign policy), the *De thematibus* (on provincial government), and the *De ceremoniis* (on imperial ceremony). He also took an active role in matters of state. He

selected as *domestikos* of the *Scholai* Bardas Phokas, brother of the former rival of Romanos Lekapenos, but in general terms Constantine followed the policy that had been set by Lekapenos' government. Thus, Constantine issued further legislation against the alienation of peasant holdings, generally repeating the provision of Lekapenos' laws, although he provided that, in many cases at least, the purchase price had to be returned. Constantine's government also took special steps for the protection of soldiers' lands, laying down principles, for example, that such lands must retain a value of at least a certain amount of gold – obviously there was a tendency to evade the law by selling off all but very small parts of the lands, making it impossible for a soldier or sailor to support himself on the income (which was, after all, one of the major considerations of the state in this issue, since at least some of the lands concerned were *stratiotika ktemata*).

The Balkans and the West remained untroubled during Constantine's reign, and military action was concentrated in the East, where Bardas Phokas continued the struggle with Saif-ad-Daulah. The results were mixed, but the Byzantines met with increasing success after 957, when Nikephoros Phokas replaced his father as *domestikos*. Constantine's diplomatic efforts reached as far afield as the courts of the Umayyad caliph Abd-ar-Rahman in Spain and Otto I in Germany. Special importance, however, should be attached to the conversion of the Russian princess Olga, widow of Igor, the first prince of Kiev (d. 945) and regent for her young son Svjatoslav, and her visit to Constantinople in 957. This was the first step toward the conversion of Russia and the beginning of real Byzantine influence there.

Constantine died in 959, and he was succeeded by his son, Romanos II (959–63). The new emperor, grandson of Romanos Lekapenos, was not especially interested in affairs of state, and he left most decisions to his adviser, the eunuch Joseph Bringas, while the *domestikos* Nikephoros Phokas conducted a series of brilliant campaigns in the East. Both Leo VI and Constantine VII had previously mounted major but unsuccessful attempts to conquer Crete, but in 961 the troops of the *domestikos* finally took the island after a long struggle. After that Nikephoros Phokas returned to the East, where he was remarkably

### Box 10.5 The “New” Harbor of Constantinople

Excavations along the south shore of Istanbul (Byzantine Constantinople) since 2004 have brought to light large-scale information about the Harbor of Theodosios (Map 3.1). These excavations at Yenikapi are in preparation for construction of a rail link between Europe and Asia across the

Bosphorus, and they have opened up most of the bottom of the harbor that had been filled in with debris and landfill from the eleventh century onward. Among the finds is significant prehistoric material, but undoubtedly most important are the remains of at least two dozen hulls of Byzantine ships and details about the arrangement and harbor facilities at the site.

Little is known about Byzantine ships. We do have a few mentions in texts (such as the *Taktika* of Leo VI). But what we have learned comes largely from underwater excavations, the most important of which (Yassi Ada wreck) explored a small merchant ship of the seventh century and the other (Serçe Liman) a ship of the third quarter of the eleventh century. The Yenikapi excavations discovered one ship with strong similarities to the Yassi Ada vessel (presumably from the seventh century), but most exciting is another that may be the first secure example of a Byzantine *dromon*, the fast-sailing, oar-propelled ancestor of the Venetian and later galleys that dominated Mediterranean naval warfare in later centuries. As is well known, the *dromons* were the main carriers of Greek Fire, the Byzantine military secret weapon that frequently turned the tide of battle in their favor. It is expected that further research on the remains from the Yenikapi excavations will provide us with critical new information about Byzantine trade, the topography of Constantinople, and the ships of the Byzantine navy.

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successful, even managing to take Aleppo, Saif-ad-Daulah’s capital. Nikephoros, the “Pale Death of the Saracens,” as he was known, gained such repute that Arab forces were said to have withdrawn at the mere mention that his armies were on the march. The removal of Saif-ad-Daulah’s power and the conquest of Crete meant that Byzantine arms were everywhere triumphant in the East and that the Aegean area would be spared the ravages of Arab pirates. This latter was of particular importance in the growth of the Byzantine economy and the ability of Byzantium to recolonize many islands and coastal areas that had been either abandoned or very sparsely settled over the past two centuries.

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